

ORGAN TRANSPLANTS: WAITING FOR THE CALL

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL/RGICOM

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 2005



Family's grief eased knowing son's organs saved eight lives

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The doctors said he was brain dead. His parents said it couldn't be. Just hours earlier, Kevin and Lori Dexter saw their smiling 19-year-old son Darryl building a playhouse for his neighbors. He declined their invitation to dinner and asked them to bring him back a snack.

When they arrived home, the Fernley couple's neighbor, Constance Stimson, said Darryl was injured in a motorcycle accident. Her 14-year-old son Michael, riding on the back, also was injured. The panicked Dexters drove to the accident scene but had to endure traffic delays caused by their son's wreck.

Later that night, as Darryl lay on a hospital bed at Washoe Medical Center, his mother ached to see his big brown eyes for the last time. She slid his lids open and sobbed.

"I kept telling him to wake up and he wouldn't," the mother of two other boys said.

She placed her ear on Darryl's chest and listened to his heart beat. But she knew it was just the machines keeping him alive.

"In my heart he was still alive," she said. "But I knew it wasn't real. I knew he was gone."

A series of tests showed the Dexters' son was brain dead. Dye was injected into Darryl's arteries, and through x-rays, they could see the dye did not penetrate into the brain. A scan also showed no bloodflow in the brain. Brain wave tests showed no electrical activity.

That was Oct. 14. A representative from an organ procurement agency asked the Dexters if they would consider donating Darryl's organs. They didn't hesitate. Darryl was not a registered organ donor, but his family knew if he had the choice, he would donate. While Darryl remained on life-support machines, staff arranged transportation for the organs and identified recipients.

Two days after the accident, doctors removed Darryl's heart, kidneys and liver and shipped them to hospitals in Northern California. According to the California Transplant Donor Network, which coordinates donations in Northern Nevada and California, Darryl's liver went to a 57-year-old man with two children, one of his kidneys and pancreas went to a 52-year-old woman with four children, and another kidney and his heart went to a 59-year-old married man. All were Californians.

Transplant advocates say one of the biggest obstacles is that family members are not aware of their loved ones' wishes and decline to donate their organs. Advocates say many people decline to donate a dead relative's organs because they fear doctors won't try to save the relative's life.

Some think the body will be destroyed and they won't be able to have an open-casket funeral. Others fear the organs will go to an undeserving person, such as a drug addict with hepatitis C.

The need for organs far exceeds the supply. In 2003, at least 7,000 patients died waiting for an organ transplant, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"It was an easy decision," said Lori Dexter, a registered organ donor. "I absolutely encourage everyone to donate. I want everyone to be a donor because there are so many people who need them."

In Nevada, an organ donor's registry through the Department of Motor Vehicles is binding legal consent to donate and a relative's permission is not required. But donation advocates say it's possible that families of registered donors may be so adamantly against harvesting their loved one's organs that hospital officials, fearing a potential lawsuit, won't press the issue.

Constance Stimson, one of Darryl's best friends, said she had spoken to Darryl several times about organ donation.

"He said he absolutely would donate his organs and wanted to get a new driver's license so he could register to be one," said Stimson, whose son Michael suffered from a broken neck, pelvis and punctured lungs from the crash.

Darryl's parents didn't know of his wishes until after they allowed his organs to be donated.

"Darryl was more than happy to save someone's life," Stimson said, adding he also took the brunt of the impact of the crash, saving her son's life.

Lori Dexter said she is proud of her son. "Our son saved eight lives," she said.

"Everyone up in heaven will know what he did."

Kevin Dexter said doctors told him that his son's organs were in great shape, even though he occasionally snuck a cigarette from his mother.

Medical officials say that less than 1 percent of deaths are medically suitable for donation because organs must be disease free and undamaged. Donors are brain-dead, meaning their organs can still function, although assisted by ventilators.

Those who die instantly, such as crash victims pronounced dead at accident scenes, cannot donate because the lack of oxygen causes organs to deteriorate. Traffic victims who have fatal head trauma that doesn't affect their organs are the most common type of donor – although their numbers have declined with the advent of helmet and safety-belt laws.

"The doctors said there was no damage below his neck," Kevin Dexter said. "Just picture your son riding down the road and a vehicle pulls out in front of him, and he flies through the window. I can't believe he didn't break any bones or damage any organs."

In about a year, the Dexters will have the option of meeting the people who received Darryl's organs, if the recipients are interested.

"It's breathtaking," his father Kevin Dexter said of the idea of meeting the recipients. "If a person's organs are taken, they can live on in someone else."

"If anyone gets my sons heart," he said through heavy sobs, "he had the biggest heart of anybody and they would get it. I think we'd be able to see Darryl in that person."



ONE DONOR

Oct. 14

About 5 p.m. – Darryl Dexter is building a playhouse for his neighbor's children. His parents ask him to go to dinner. He says he is busy.

About 6:30 p.m. – Darryl and his neighbor, Michael Stimson, 14, plan on going to a dance at Fernley High School later. First, Darryl wants to ride his new motorcycle to clear up an insurance question with the person he bought it from. Michael rides in back.

Just after 7 p.m. – Allison Wong, 49, of Fernley, drives her van into Darryl's path on U.S. 50 Alternate. Soon after, Darryl's parents learn of the crash and drive to the scene. They see their injured son on the ground. Darryl, Michael and Wong are taken to Washoe Medial Center.

About 11:30 pm – Doctors declare Darryl brain dead. His parents donate his organs. Michael remains hospitalized with broken bones and punctured lungs. Wong is treated for minor injuries and later cited for failure to yield.

Oct. 17

Medial officials remove Darryl's organs. He is later cremated.

Oct. 21

A celebration of life event is held in Grass Valley, Calif., for Darryl, who grew up there.